Legault says Conservative leader an 'agitator'; Duhaime said head of Coalition Avenir Québec is panicking after a 'very poorly handled debate'

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Byline: Jacob Serebrin The Canadian Press

Body

Coalition Avenir Québec Leader François Legault went on the offensive Friday, comparing rival Éric Duhaime to former United States president Donald Trump and saying the Conservative leader's stance on COVID-19 restrictions is disqualifying.

It is understandable that Quebecers were frustrated with COVID-19 health orders, but party leaders have to be responsible, Legault told reporters in Laval, Que., north of Montreal.

Duhaime is an "agitator" who is "profiting from the distress of certain people to win votes," Legault said, before comparing the Conservative leader to the former president.

The Conservatives have channelled the public's anger toward COVID-19 restrictions - such as the five-month-long curfew - and as a result have significantly risen in the polls over the past two years.

"He even reminds me of someone in the south (who) also denied the reality, denied the numbers," Legault said, without directly mentioning Trump's name.

It was the second day in a row that Legault described Duhaime's position on COVID-19 rules as "disqualifying." The incumbent premier made the same attack to reporters following a leaders debate Thursday evening.

Duhaime responded to Legault Friday, saying the CAQ leader is "panicking" after the debate.

"He was obviously not happy with his performance and I can understand," the Conservative leader said.

"It was a ... very difficult debate for Mr. Legault; it was very poorly handled. He did a very poor job of defending his government's record, particularly on the mental health of children, and he is looking for a scapegoat."

Duhaime denied that he's an agitator and said Quebecers deserve to hear ideas that differ from the premier's.

"I know he's a man who tolerates very little criticism and different ideas; it's been two years that he's had a lot of power in his hands and clearly he doesn't appreciate the democratic aspect of an election campaign, which is there to debate these issues," Duhaime said.

Duhaime said that while Quebec had the "most radical" COVID-19 restrictions in the country, the province is "far from having the best record" when it comes to the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19 per 100,000 people.

Had he been in power, the government would have protected the most vulnerable and allowed the rest of the public to follow advice from health officials, Duhaime said.

Legault has said he believes excess mortality - the number of deaths over a certain period that exceed what would be expected compared with previous years - is a better measure of the pandemic's impact than COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people.

A 2021 report published by the Royal Society of Canada argued that Quebec came closer than any other province to capturing the true death toll of COVID-19, in part because it tested more people for the disease after death than any other province except Manitoba.

"I think Éric Duhaime is smart enough to see, like the rest of us, that the data on excess mortality is clear: there were fewer deaths in Quebec because we had more measures and he knows it," Legault said Friday.

Elsewhere, Québec Solidaire spokesperson Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, who was a frequent target of Legault's attacks during Thursday's second and final leaders debate, accused the CAQ leader of lying about the left-wing party's plan to fight climate change.

Nadeau-Dubois said that despite Legault's claims, his party wouldn't force businesses to close. Instead, he said, the plan reflects an acknowledgment that certain industries - like oil refineries - will see shrinking demand in coming years.

Legault's claims are "unworthy of someone who wants to be premier," Nadeau-Dubois said.

Later in the day, Nadeau-Dubois and Liberal Leader Dominique Anglade were among the party leaders who participated in a march for "climate justice" in Montreal. Quebec's incumbent environment minister, Benoit Charette, had planned to participate but left the march before it began amid jeers from participants.

Organizers had asked politicians not to participate unless they supported the protesters' demands, which included a total end to the production and consumption of fossil fuels in Quebec by 2030.

Earlier on Friday, Parti Québécois Leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon said he was pausing his campaign after developing flu-like symptoms. St-Pierre Plamondon said on Twitter he has tested negative for COVID-19 twice but would isolate as a precaution.

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